NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 392. Price, Five Cents.

A QUEEN OF HER KIND

OR A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN'S NERVE

As Nick Carter came running forward, he saw Cora Tempest thrust one hand into the bosom her waist, draw out a revolver, and while the negro was almost beside her, there was a flash and a report, and he pitched forward on his face.

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A QUEEN OF HER KIND;

OR,

A Beautiful Woman's Nerve.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A WOMAN'S THREAT.

Nick Carter was at the Great Northern Hotel in the city of Chicago.

He had completed the business that had called him to the Lake city, which had ended in the arrest of a beautiful young woman named Cora Dumont as the perpetrator of a most remarkable series of daring and mysterious burglaries, and, having turned her over to the chief of police, he felt that his duty was ended.

Nevertheless, he had not immediately left the city. There was a matter of personal business which detained him there twenty-four hours after the surrender of his prisoner, and now that also was finished and he was standing near the desk in the office of the hotel, engaged in looking over the schedule of trains, when he felt a slight touch against his arm and turned to discover one of the youngest of the hotel bell boys at his elbow.

"Well, youngster, what can I do for you?" he inquired, kindly.

"There's a lady in a private parlor who wants to see you, sir," replied the boy.

"Wants to see me? You must be mistaken, young man."

"Oh, no, I'm not, sir! She stood right up yonder a minute ago and pointed you out to me; and she told me to tell you that it was on very important business and to ask you to please come at once."

"Did she tell you who it was she wanted?"

"Yes, sir. She said it was you."

"I mean, did she tell you my name?"

"No, sir. She just said, 'That gentleman,' and pointed you out to me."

"Did she say what her name was?"

"No, sir."

"Humph! Well, if you are sure you are right, sonny, I'll go with you."

The boy led the way to the parlor floor and presently paused before a door of one of the private parlors.

"This is the room, sir," he said, turning away, and Nick, who had not as yet given the unusual summons sufficient thought to even wonder who it could be who had sent for him, tapped on the door.

The voice which bade him enter was not sufficiently distinct for him to recognize it, but, when he opened the door and entered the room, he admitted to himself that he felt some astonishment upon discovering the identity of the woman who had summoned him there. However, he did not permit his face to give any expression to his thoughts.

He merely bowed coldly, inclining his head ever so little in the salutation, while he said in a low, even tone:

"This is rather an unexpected meeting, Miss Dumont."

"Indeed?" replied the beautiful young woman, rising and crossing the room toward the detective until she stood facing him. "You scarcely expected to find your female Raffles, otherwise Miss Cora Dumont, in this parlor when you were bidden here, did you?"

"I expected her not at all. Have you escaped from the custody of the chief?"

"Not at all."

"No?"

Nick raised his brows and then smiled coldly.

"Then I am to conclude that your matchless wiles have had a more salutary effect upon him than they did upon me."

"Well"—she smiled back at him brightly—"that might be one method of expression which would apply to the case."

"He has given you your liberty; is that what you mean?"

"I am certainly at liberty, and with his full permission."

"Is it a part of your present program to inform me why you sent the bell boy to ask me to come here?"

"Certainly. Won't you be seated?"

"No. Your business with me must be so trivial that it cannot detain me more than a moment. I am quite sure that I have no business with you—and that I desire none."

"Don't you think, Mr. Carter, that such words from you to me are needlessly cruel?"

"I know that they are true."

She advanced a step nearer to him and fixed her big, beautiful eyes upon him, and, in spite of the *sang-froid* which the detective outwardly assumed, he could not but feel a thrill of admiration tingle in his nerves as he beheld her thus, within the touch of his hands, radiant with beauty, and health, and youth—and more than all that, evidently in earnest in her desire to have him near her.

"You are always distinctly truthful, I am told," she said, in a low tone. "Have you any positive engagement, or is there any reason why, if you cared to do so, you could not devote the present hour to my society?"

"No; there is not."

"In that case I will again ask you to sit down for a moment. I really have something to say to you which I, at least, consider of importance. Won't you so far oblige me?"

"Very well," replied the detective.

He crossed the room to the window and seated himself in a chair so that his back was to the light, but she followed him quickly, and reaching over his shoulder, drew the heavy, brocaded curtain partly across the window.

"I have read in novels that it is a habit of detectives, whenever they are about to engage in a conversation with a person, to sit with their backs to a window, or to a bright light, in order that they may have the advantage of shading their own features from close inspection, while the face of whoever happens to become the *vis-à-vis* is thrown directly in the glare of the light. I

see that you are not an exception to the rule, Mr. Carter," she said, "but while I have nothing to conceal in this interview, I assure you that I do wish to see your face while we are talking, quite as much as you wish to see mine."

"Shall I change places with you?" asked Nick.

"Oh, no. That is not necessary—now that I have drawn the curtain. You are surprised to see me here; are you not?"

"Somewhat; yes."

"I have broken my word to the chief in letting you know that I am at liberty."

"Indeed. How so?"

"I promised him that I would take pains to avoid you while you remained in the city; instead of doing that, I have deliberately sent for you; in fact, I came to this hotel to find you—for no other reason."

"And having found me—what next?" asked Nick.

"I hardly know—I scarcely know why I sent for you at all."

"Possibly it was to make a confession," suggested Nick, with a smile.

"Possibly," she agreed; "but not the sort of confession you mean. Some day, however, I do think I might like to make even that sort of a confession—to you."

"Why to me, especially?"

"Mr. Carter," she said, leaning forward in her chair and fixing her wonderful eyes full upon him with an expression so intense, so appealing, so pathetic and so earnest that the detective was moved in spite of himself, "if I were to reply to that question literally, you would think me unwomanly—or, if not that, it is certain that you would not understand me as I would wish to be understood."

"Possibly," replied Nick. "We are all more or less likely to be misunderstood in this world. Still, if you have anything of importance to say to me, I would suggest that you get it off your mind as soon as possible. You had a purpose in sending for me—what was that purpose?"

"I wished merely to see you and to talk to you. I had nothing especial to say to you."

"Ah!" said Nick, rising. "In that case I think I will go. You have seen me and you have talked with me, so the purpose of the interview is accomplished."

"Pardon me, it is not. I wished you to know a few things which I can tell you. Did you ever hear the name of Isabel Benton?"

"Yes," replied Nick, calmly, for although he was surprised to hear this woman mention that name, he did not permit any evidence of it to appear on his face.

"Would you be surprised to know that Isabel Benton is here, in Chicago?"

"Not at all. Nothing concerning that woman would surprise me."

"She is here. She was inside the house supposed to belong to Mrs. Sunderlin when you called there during your investigation of the burglaries for which you finally arrested me."

"I am sorry that you did not tell me this at that time instead of now," said Nick.

"No doubt; but I assure you I would have told you if I had dared—that is, there were reasons why I could not tell you then."

"I hope you do not wish me to believe that the woman whom you introduced to me as Mrs. Sunderlin, was really Isabel Benton. I am not so easily fooled as that."

"No, Mr. Carter. The Mrs. Sunderlin you saw is the Mrs. Sunderlin whom Chicago knows. She is, however, merely a dummy figure. Isabel and I have been the real actors in everything that has taken place."

"I think I begin to understand. But why do you tell me all this—now?"

"Because I want you to know it. Because Isabel Benton hates you—hates you, horribly. Because she hates another person in whom you are more or less interested."

"What other person?" demanded Nick.

"Mercedes Danton."

"Well?" asked Nick. "You have succeeded in interesting me, Miss Dumont, for I perceive that you really did have a reason in asking me here, after all."

"Shall I quote to you the exact words of a threat I

have heard Isabel Benton make?" asked Cora Dumont, leaning toward him again.

"Yes, please," was the reply.

"I heard her say these words an hour ago: 'The way to make your enemy suffer is to strike him through his affections, and I will make Nick Carter wish that Mercedes Danton had never been born. He loves her, and through her I will strike him.'"

CHAPTER II.

THE ASSASSIN AT THE DOOR.

Nick Carter left his chair and crossed the room to the spot where Cora Dumont was seated. Standing over her, he looked down upon her upraised face and said, quite slowly:

"Miss Dumont, my business leads me always to inquire into the motives of others whenever there is a deed or a word used which concerns me, or a case upon which I may happen to be engaged. I want you to listen carefully to me for a moment while I rehearse something for your benefit, for I believe it is high time when you should at least understand the position which you occupy.

"I shall ask you a few questions presently, but first I have something to say. I first knew about Isabel Benton through her connection with an attempt to murder an entire family in order that she might impersonate the heiress, who is Mercedes Danton, and so possess herself of the immense fortune that would be left. She happens to be a very distant relative of Miss Danton's, and although the tie of blood between the two young women is so remote that it is difficult to trace, yet fate has played a strange freak with them, and so has made them—outwardly—almost alike. With a few touches here and there, quite easy to make, either of them might readily pass before ordinary acquaintances for the other.

"These two are as unlike in character as possible. Miss Danton is as beautiful of soul as of feature. Isabel Benton is at once a perfect beauty and a perfect fiend. One is angelic, the other is devilish. One is the type of good, pure womanhood; the other correctly represents the depths to which womanhood can sink, while outwardly she retains the aspect of respectability."

"And what am I, Mr. Carter?"

"We are not discussing you at present, Miss Dumont; we may have occasion to do so later on. Isabel Benton, although she still calls herself by that name, is really a married woman, and it was her husband who was to commit the series of murders by which she was to profit. He did really commit one murder—perhaps more—and he is soon to suffer the death penalty. All this you doubtless know already. I have thought it best to relate it to you in order that we may perfectly understand each other when I ask you to tell me all that you know about the threat you have just repeated. I must inquire into your motives, and you must tell me all there is to tell, for while I do not wish to be understood as threatening you, I do wish you to know that there is a higher authority in this city than the one which has released you from custody, and that it is within my power to send you to a prison cell at any moment, should I choose to do so.

"Wait; I have not done yet. You are a woman of rare beauty. You are also one of rare ability. I told you that much the first time I ever saw you, and, although it was said banteringly, I meant all that I said. I do not believe you are a bad woman, at heart. In fact, I believe that your impulses are good, and now that I know of your association with Isabel Benton, I can understand that there is at least some explanation of the part you have played, and that the explanation might be in your favor. The point of it all is that you are not what you seem. You have posed as a young society woman—a lady; while in reality you are a criminal.

"Now, having said all that, let me add that notwithstanding your amazing beauty, I shall treat you as a criminal unless you give me good cause not to do so. I was preparing to leave Chicago to-night for New York. You sent for me, according to your statement, merely because you wished to see me and to talk to me; but in seeing me and talking to me, you have wittingly or unwittingly brought the name of Mer-

cedes Danton into our conversation, so now you must tell me all you know about Isabel Benton and her threat against Miss Danton, and you must explain your motive in calling me here to this room, or—you must take the consequences."

While the detective was talking he had stood between Cora Dumont and the door, and when he ceased speaking he was directly in the center of the room, facing her, and therefore with his back toward the entrance.

The close of his statement sounded something like a threat, and he expected to see her offer some sort of protest to his remarks; but he was not prepared for the movement she did make.

As he ceased speaking she leaped to her feet with a sharp cry, which, in that briefest fraction of an instant that was vouchsafed him, he might have imagined was the result of outraged feeling against his remarks; but even while she cried out, he was conscious that her eyes were looking past him and not at him.

Instantly he wheeled in his tracks, and as he did so there was the sharp report of a pistol behind him and he felt the sting of a bullet against the inner side of his left arm.

With the stinging sensation, made by the passing bullet, came also a sharp cry from Cora Dumont, and as he leaped toward the door, now open, he heard her fall to the floor from her chair behind him.

From the instant when the report of the pistol rang through the hotel to that in which Nick Carter passed through the open door from which the shot was fired, the duration of time was too trifling to be contemplated, and yet when he reached the corridor there were only four persons to be seen, and each one of the four was rushing toward the sound of the shot and not away from it. Those four were all masculine; three were men grown, evidently guests of the hotel, and the fourth was a bell boy in the uniform of the hotel.

There was no sign of a fugitive anywhere—there was not a suggestion of a person who might have fired the shot through the door and afterward fled, and Nick halted then and there while the men grouped themselves around him, eager to learn the cause of the shot.

At the same time many others made their appearance, and in an amazing short space of time the corridor was crowded with eager questioners.

But in the first glance Nick Carter perceived that the fugitive had escaped, and he knew that behind him, inside the room he had left, was a woman, wounded, perhaps killed; and with that remarkable ability to think and to act quickly, for which the detective was renowned, he realized that the would-be assassin had carefully anticipated the chances of escape before the shot was fired, and that inasmuch as he or she, whichever it might be, had succeeded in dodging that first rush of his, there was now little chance that he could discover who it was except in the regular way.

Moreover, even while the report of the pistol was still ringing in his ears he had decided in his own mind who it was who had fired the shot.

The mere knowledge that Isabel Benton was in the hotel was sufficient to convince him that if an opportunity offered where there might be a chance for her to kill him without suffering the risk of discovery she would not hesitate.

These thoughts, be it remembered, rushed through his head with the rapidity of lightning, and also the recollection that Cora Dumont had fallen to the floor wounded, perhaps dead; and therefore the pause he made in the corridor where he encountered the guests and the bell boy, as well as noticed that others were rushing toward that part of the hotel, was of an instant's duration only.

In the group which surrounded him was one large, burly man, and Nick laid his hand upon that gentleman's shoulder.

"Do me the favor to guard this door and permit nobody but those in authority to enter," he said. To a second man, he added: "Please bring a doctor to this room as quickly as possible."

Then he stepped back through the door and hastened at once to the side of Cora Dumont, who was stretched at full length on the floor beside the chair from which she had fallen when the bullet struck her.

A glance sufficed to convince him that she was not dead—was not even seriously wounded; and while he bent over her she opened her eyes and looked up at him with a frightened, appealing glance, which was difficult to define.

"You are not hurt, are you?" asked Nick, speaking rapidly. "The bullet did not strike you, did it? Are you wounded? I can see no evidence of a wound."

"I—don't—think—I—was struck," she murmured. "But I thought you were killed. I fainted, I think. The sight of her——"

"Of whom—Isabel?"

"Yes. She stood in the doorway behind you with a revolver pointed at your back. The sight of her and the knowledge of what she intended to do, paralyzed me. I could not speak; I could not move. I thought surely she would kill you."

"You are sure you are not hurt?" asked Nick again.

"No. The bullet did not touch me."

"Good. You say you saw and recognized Isabel Benton?"

"Perfectly. She was disguised as a bell boy, and——"

"Ah!" said Nick. Then he added: "When the others come here, and they are coming now, pretend that you know nothing of who fired the shot. We will both be densely ignorant. I have my reasons. Let the police take the case up in their own way for the hotel people. Nobody is hurt——"

"But there is blood on your wrist; your cuff is soaked with it," she gasped, catching sight of his sleeve and turning pale in an instant.

"It is only a scratch; forget it," said Nick. "Here they come. Remember."

Then there came the usual flood of questions which follows upon such an occurrence, and of course they brought forth no information.

The incident resolved itself into one of the unsolved mysteries.

One of the doctors who came to the room examined Nick's arm, and found, as he had said, that the wound amounted to nothing; that it was merely a scratch which had drawn a considerable flow of blood, but even that had stopped by the time the physician saw it. Th place was sponged with an antiseptic and a bandag wound around it, and in a few moments Nick ha forgotten—as far as the wound was concerned—that bullet had struck him.

But there were questions and answers galore befo Nick and Cora Dumont were free from interruptic again. The hotel people had to be satisfied; the poli insisted upon being informed upon the point whe there was no information to give, and there were r porters who sought to make thrilling stories out the circumstance; but at last everybody was satisfie and Nick Carter and Cora Dumont found themselv again alone together.

Then it was that he turned to her with a smile, a said:

"It begins to look as if fate intended that we shou see more, rather than less, of each other, Miss D mont." And she clasped her hands together and rais her eyes to his.

"I could have told you that from the first moment saw you," she said, in a low tone.

CHAPTER III.

"FATED, LIKE ALL TEMPESTS, TO DIE IN VIOLENCE

The two were interrupted at that moment by a t at the door, and opening it, Nick received from t hands of a bell boy, an envelope addressed to Mi Cora Dumont.

"Where did you get this?" he asked the boy.

"From the clerk at the desk, sir," was the reply.

"Very well. That will do."

He turned back into the room with the note in h hand, and holding it thus, he said to his companion:

"There is a certain class of criminals who delight writing letters. Close observation of them, for mat years, has convinced me that they are both danger and cruel. That they are reckless goes without sayi and being reckless, they are therefore easy—as a rule to apprehend. Our enemy, Isabel, belongs to th class. This letter which I hold in my hand is doul

less written by her, and, somewhat to my surprise, it is addressed to you, instead of to me. Read it."

She took the letter and broke the seal. Then she read aloud the following:

"'You must know, Cora, that I suspected your motive when I found that you had arranged an interview with Nick Carter, and I determined to know what passed between you. I do know, and so am convinced that you are a traitor. It is extremely fortunate that I have not taken you more deeply into my confidence than I have done, and therefore there is very little that you can betray to him; but even that little is more—much more—than I care to have him know; and also, even that little is sufficient to convince me that you are a traitor. I can see, quite plainly, that you are hopelessly in——'"

She paused abruptly in the reading and raised her eyes to Nick's.

"Go on," he said.

"No," she replied. "I cannot. You must read it for yourself."

"Very well," he said. "Give the letter to me."

She extended it partly toward him and then half withdrew it again. In doing so she dropped her eyes so that he could see nothing of them but the long lashes where they drooped against her cheeks.

"You will remember that what is said here is merely the expression of Isabel's belief?" she asked, still without raising her eyes.

"Yes," he replied; and she gave the letter into his hand.

Then he continued the reading aloud, as follows:

"'I can see, quite plainly, that you are hopelessly in love with Nick Carter, and I know that you are one of those women who can become angel or devil through your affections. But, my dear, Nick Carter is not for you. He loves Mercedes Danton. Perhaps he has not admitted this soft impeachment, even to himself, but it is nevertheless the fact. You love him, Cora, with all your heart and soul, with all——' What unutterable bosh!" exclaimed Nick, interrupting himself.

"Read on," said Cora, breathlessly.

"What? Do you care to hear this twaddle?" asked Nick.

"I think we should both know all that she may have to say," she replied, raising her eyes, now moistened with unshed tears, and gazing strangely into his.

"Humph!" he said. "Very well. Listen. I will read it through to the end without a comment."

Then, in a cold and even tone, he continued the reading:

"'With all your heart and soul, with all your strength, and I know you well enough to be certain that there is nothing on earth or in heaven which you would not sacrifice at the altar of that love. Very well; I hate him quite as devoutly as you love him. He has crossed my path too many times for me to feel anything but enmity toward him; and now that he has stolen your loyalty to me, and turned you from a loving companion and friend, into a traitor and a bitter foe, I can scarcely be expected to regard him any more pleasantly.

"'I hope he will be present when you receive this note, for I know that you will not dare to read it to him, for you will regard your opportunity to win his love, as lost, if he discovers in this manner the true state of your feelings. But if he should be with you when this is placed in your hands, he will insist upon reading it, and—he will despise you. Don't you see, Cora, that thus my revenge upon you is already begun?

"'Revenge! A lovely word, is it not? How I will revel in it! How I will drink in joy and ecstasy over the revenge which I shall deal out, bit by bit, to both of you! You will see! You will know! You will find out, to your cost—both of you!

"'When I fired the bullet from the door to-day, I did not intend to kill him, but I did wish to break his arm—to wound him, to disable him, if possible. But I have learned that he was scarcely touched by the bullet. Ah, well, there will be another and a better opportunity.

"'I shall make you both suffer, but how and when and where, I will not tell you—now. Of one thing you may be sure. I shall disappear from my old haunts to-day, so that neither you nor Nick Carter will be able to find me—but all the while I will be near to you both, if you should remain together. It is rather a remarkable circumstance that all my enemies should be grouped here in Chicago at the present time. Of course you have told your detective that Mercedes is

here. Or have you not done so? Has your love for him, and your jealousy of Mercedes, forced you to keep back this little bit of information from him, I wonder? Well, if so, and if he reads this note, he will know it now; but even you will not be able to tell him where she is stopping, because you do not know.

"'I have written enough, have I not? I want you to realize that you will rue the day when you saw fit to betray me and to go over to the enemy. I want you to know that you cannot win the love of Nick Carter, if you should try a thousand years—because he loves another. I want you to know that if you should win, even his regard, that I will be on the look-out to foil you in every move you make, and near you always, to do everything in my power to render you as unhappy and miserable as I can. I don't know whether or not Nick Carter realizes the full extent of a woman's hate; but he has mine, and he shall be made to feel it. I am not much given to making threats, but if there is the power and the possibility within my reach to get even with him and with you, I will do it, and do it in a way which there will be no mistaking. That is all. I need not sign this letter.'

"A very charming little note," said Nick, folding the letter with a careless laugh.

Then he raised his eyes to hers, and saw that they were filled with tears, and that she was drooping abjectly, with a piteous appeal in her expression.

"Oh! What must you think of me?" she whispered.

"Think of you?" exclaimed Nick. "Why, I think of you exactly as I did before I read this silly letter."

"You regard me with disgust—with abhorrence—with aversion—with contempt. Oh, my God! I could stand anything but that! Anything but contempt!"

She dropped into the chair and buried her face in her hands; then she began to sob, and while she did so, Nick stood with his hands behind his back, looking down upon her with a strange expression in his eyes.

That there was contempt for her in his emotions at that moment, cannot be denied; but Nick Carter, as well as other men, is human, and there is no man in the world who is, or who can be adamant in the presence of a woman—and particularly a beautiful woman, who loves him.

If he chose, outwardly, to ignore the statements made in the letter, Cora Dumont's manner convinc him only too well that they were nevertheless true.

There is a certain quality in the make-up of eve man which is inclined to surrender to the genuine lo of a beautiful woman, even if he has no real love f her; and in all the world there lives no man with tenderer heart and a more loving nature than Ni Carter.

Moreover, when a woman loves a man and he ca not return that love, he feels, in a sense, like a gui being; he feels that he has unwittingly done her terrible wrong—one for which he is in no sense sponsible, but which nevertheless he feels in du bound to atone.

Just now, however, the true state of his feelin was difficult to describe. He was not aware that Co Dumont had ever seen him but three times in her li and—well, he shrugged his shoulders and crossed the window, where he stood with his back to her f several moments while he waited for the paroxysm weeping and sobbing to pass; for nobody could kn better than Nick Carter the fatality which might company any attempt to console Cora now, or wh might accompany any effort on his part to dry h tears.

Presently, he was conscious that the sobbing h ceased, but he did not turn his head.

Then he heard the rustle of her clothing as she l the chair where she was sitting, and he knew that s was approaching him from behind; and still he kept h back turned toward her, as if he was not conscio that she had moved; still his hands were clasped b hind him, and his face was toward the window.

He knew that she was quite close to him, but he d not move. He could feel that she almost touched hi and that she was standing directly behind him, waitin but for what?

Then, suddenly, he heard the rustle of her clothi again, and the next instant she had seized one of h hands and was raining a shower of kisses upon it, a when he would have snatched his hand away, she clut to it with a desperation which he could not overcom without violence, and so he stood quite still, passive

I permitted her to press her hot lips against his hand again and again.

Then, suddenly, she released his hand, and he could tell that she had partly regained her self-control, and had risen to her feet again; but still he did not turn to speak to her.

"You cannot despise me more than I despise myself," she whispered, close to his ear. "I am going to say good-by to you now. I am going out of your presence forever. I shall never bother you again."

"Why go?" he asked, without turning. "This is a folly which will soon pass. It cannot be real, you know. In an hour you will regret it as much as I do, and we will both forget it. Control yourself, Miss Chester. You are distraught now. The events of the last few days have been too much for you. I am a stranger to you, and you are beside yourself with nervous excitement; that is all."

"Ah, no; it is not all," she replied, and there were tears in her throat as she spoke. "It is not all. Or, yes, it is all. It is everything! I am ashamed. I despise myself. I am what you have called me—a criminal. I am beneath your notice, almost beneath even your contempt, but yet I am a woman, and save for the wickedness you know about, I am a good woman."

"I believe you are," he replied to her, but still without turning and without moving. The hand she had held and kissed still hung listlessly at his side, and now she seized it again and pressed her lips against it rapturously.

"Thank you—oh, thank you for that!" she exclaimed, brokenly. "You do not believe that I am all bad, do you?"

"No; but the barrier which stands between you and utter condemnation, in the sight of all self-respecting men and women, is very frail and unsubstantial. You have broken through it in one way, but I believe to-day that you have somehow gotten back on the right side of it, and that if you are determined and strong of spirit as well as of intention, that you can remain where you are. You are a creature of impulses, Cora; your present conduct demonstrates that much. It was your impulse, doubtless, which drew you into the commission of the burglaries. Your impulse now is for good. Follow that one. Forget what you have said and what you have done during the last half hour."

"You ask now what is utterly impossible," she moaned, still holding his hand.

"Nonsense," he said.

"Listen," she said, starting to her feet again and releasing his hand. "Please do not move. Please do not turn around. Stand as you are and hear what I have to say, for I could not utter the words if you were looking at me while I say them."

She seemed to hesitate for one brief instant, and then she went on rapidly:

"It is all too true what Isabel said in her letter. I am ashamed—but it is true. I cannot deny it. I would if I could; but it is impossible. I feel that you should know; but whether you hate me for it, or feel only contempt, I can no more refrain from telling you than the sunflower can withhold its face from the sun when the orb of day shines upon it. All that Isabel said in her letter is true. Hear me out, for I am going away from you when I have done. I want to go away without seeing what is in your eyes, for I know that there is only contempt for me there. I want to go away from you, remembering only what I have said and felt, and that you heard me in silence. I am unwomanly—I unsex myself when I talk to you thus, but if I were a million times more contemptible than I am—if I were a million times less womanly, less worthy of your respect, still I could not hold my tongue. There is a power within me that is greater and stronger than I am. There is that within me which will be heard, although I know only too well that it is suicidal for me to talk as I am talking now. But you should know that all this has not been the consequence of the few meetings between us of which you are cognizant. It is the growth of years. I have grown to womanhood almost beside you, unnoticed by you always. I have been near you since I was a little girl, but even now you do not remember me——"

The detective wheeled in his tracks and stepped aside so that the full light from the window shone into the face of his companion, and as she started back with

a little cry of alarm, he caught her by the arm and drew her still nearer to the window.

"Hush, Cora!" he said; then, in a low, quick tone which carried with it a note of command which compelled her to obey: "I do remember you now. You are Cora Tempest, not Cora Dumont. You are the little girl who lived opposite to me in New York for so long—the little girl that was, now grown to womanhood. Little Cora Tempest, whom I have not seen since she wore short frocks and braided hair down her back; the little, fearless, freckled Cora Tempest who once, when you were not yet twelve years old, waited out nearly all night in the cold and wet of a November storm to warn me against a great danger, and in warning me, you saved not only me but every member of my household from death. Child! child! Now a woman! I remember you now."

"Thank God!" she breathed.

"And yet," he continued, "it is not strange that I should have forgotten you. You were a child then. I scarcely saw you at all after that, save when you were going to or returning from school—and when you were still a child—sixteen, I think they said—your father died and you were taken away so that I utterly lost track of you."

"And forgot me as well," she murmured.

"I am afraid that is true," he admitted. "And that was five—no, six years ago. Six years have wrought great changes, Cora. It is not strange that even I should not have recognized you. An awkward, freckled girl is transformed into a beautiful woman. The chrysalis has burst and the butterfly is born. It is not strange that I did not trace the worm through the bright coloring of your wings now. Little Cora Tempest," he mused.

"Yes," she replied, "and well named. A tempest, indeed. A Tempest in name, a tempest in nature; born in a tempest, nurtured in a tempest. Tempestuous in heart and soul, and fated, like all tempests, to die in obscurity, and in the despair and fear of all mankind."

CHAPTER IV.

ABDUCTED BY A WOMAN.

What response Nick Carter might have made to Cora Tempest's bitter statement cannot be known, for they were interrupted at that moment by a rap upon the door, and upon opening it, Nick discovered that the chief of police had sent an urgent request for him to come at once to headquarters if possible.

"Say that I will go at once," he told the messenger, then turning back into the parlor, he said:

"I must see you again, Cora. You saved my life once, and now I must stand your friend in need. I must save you from yourself. Where are you going when you leave this hotel?"

"Back to the house of Mrs. Sunderlin," she replied mechanically. "It is the only place where I can go."

"And where is Mrs. Sunderlin—or rather the woman who posed under that name?"

"I don't know. She may have returned there. Isabel may have sent her away for good."

"And Isabel? Where is she, do you suppose? Are you not likely to encounter her there?"

"More than likely—if she has the courage to go there now."

The detective was silent for a moment, thinking deeply.

"Good!" he said, presently. "It is the best thing you can do, to go there. I will know where you are and I can watch over you. You will be mistress of that house when you arrive—if Isabel is not there, eh?"

"Yes."

"Go there, then, but be a long time on the way: an hour or more; two hours. By that time I will have the house under surveillance. Enter fearlessly, and when a man presents himself at the door and gives you a card with the word 'Tempest' written upon it, admit him. He will come from me and his duty will be to watch over you. This evening—I do not know at what hour—but sometime this evening—I will come to you. Remember, Cora, you are my ward for the present. You are again the child who saved my life by giving

ely warning. Go, now, and forget, if you can, rything that has occurred, save that we are old nds and that we will always be good friends."

* * * * * * *

When Nick Carter entered the office of the chief of tice he found that gentleman awaiting him anxiously, l he plunged at once and without preamble into the sons for the sudden summons he had sent to the ective.

"By Jove, Carter!" he said, "I am glad that you had gone from the city. I want you, and I want you lly. Can you remain here a few days, yet, do you nk?"

"Perhaps," replied Nick. "What is it all about? re burglaries?"

"Worse. Far worse."

"Indeed! What now?"

"Abduction, by thunder! No less. Abduction in h life! Abduction of the kind one reads about in vels, and never hears about in real life. The real ng, worthy of a Lightfoot Dick or a Gentleman ck! A regular out-and-out, eighteenth-century ab tion, right in the heart of Chicago, in broad day ht! By the great, jumping Jupiter, Carter, I was ver so done up in my life!"

"You do seem to be rather excited, chief, that's a t," said the detective, coolly. "It might be a good a if you were to relieve your mind by telling me t it; you are in danger of apoplexy otherwise."

"Sure as you are born, Carter. Kenneally Simmons s just here. He's a banker; one of the richest and st influential in Chicago. His wife is—or rather s entertaining a guest from New York, a Miss nton—Mercedes Danton."

Nick's right hand tightened upon the arm of the air in which he was seated, but otherwise he gave sign that he had ever heard the name before.

"And the two ladies came into the city this after on from a short visit to a mutual friend in Lake rest. You know where that is? A suburb out on e North Side. Well, they were met at the station one of Simmons' carriages, and they started to drive home. They were almost there when their carriage was stopped in the middle of the street by a man who told the coachman that one of the horses had picked up a stone in his shoe, and the coachman got down to examine it."

"Quite a natural thing for him to do under the circumstances."

"Sure. When he picked up the horse's foot to look at it, he felt the muzzle of a revolver pressed against his head behind his ear, and the man who had stopped him told him that if he dropped the horse's foot before he was told to do so, he'd get a bullet in his head."

"So he hung on to it, I suppose," suggested Nick.

"You bet your life he hung on to it! I shouldn't wonder if he is hanging on to it yet, in his imagination."

"Well; what then?"

"The coachman can only tell what he heard, for he could see nothing. But he heard a carriage drive up on the side opposite him, and then he heard a half-suppressed scream from his own carriage. Two or three minutes later the carriage door slammed shut and the other carriage drove away. Then the man with the pistol told him to climb up on his box and drive on as if nothing had happened, and he added: 'If you stop, or look back, or speak to anybody while you are within range of this pistol, I'll bore you.'"

"I see; and when the coachman did look back the man had disappeared."

"Sure thing. Only the coachman didn't look back at all. He contracted stiff neck right then and there."

"Then, what next?"

"It wasn't far to the house after that, and when they got there the coachman found his mistress inside the carriage, unconscious. She had been chloroformed. Her companion, Miss Danton, was missing."

"Let me interrupt you a minute, chief. Ring the bell and order in the best man you've got on hand, will you?"

"What——"

"Never mind. Let me have him at once, please."

"Send Brighton in here at once," commanded the

chief, when his bell was answered, and in a moment more Sam Brighton appeared.

Nick Carter wrote the one word "Tempest" upon a card and gave it to Brighton.

"I want you to go out to Lake View at once," he said. "You know the house of Mrs. Sunderlin? I want you to go there. Ask for Miss Dumont. Be sure that you see her in person. Give her that card. She will know that you have come from me. I want you to wait there till I come. Let anybody who may come enter, but permit nobody to leave the house under any pretext—and, Brighton, if the person whom I think will go there should happen to appear, you will have a job on your hands."

"I'll carry out my orders, or somebody will get hurt," replied Brighton, as he went out of the room.

"Good!" replied Nick. "Let us hope that it will not be you."

"Now, what in blazes——" began the chief, when Brighton had gone; but Nick interrupted him with a laugh.

"Just a measure of protection for the beautiful young woman whom you were so kind as to let go free after I had captured her," he said, with a touch of satire in his voice. "Now, let us get back to this abduction, chief. What did Mrs. Simmons have to say when they revived her?"

"Mighty little. All she knew was that the carriage stopped. She heard somebody tell the coachman that one of the horses had picked up a stone."

"Where, by the way, was the footman all this time?"

"He was left at home. Had an attack of cramps just before the carriage started for the railway station."

"Well, go ahead with what Mrs. Simmons had to tell."

"After the coachman got down from his box a closed hack drove up to the carriage. A—— I say, Carter, that is the funny part of the whole thing."

"What is?"

"The part that I am about to tell you."

"Well, let's hear it."

"When the hack stopped, a woman—a woman, mind you—got out of it and came to the carriage door, opened it and leaned inside. She wore a heavy veil, so that her features could not be seen. At the same instant the door on the opposite side of the carriage was also opened and another woman appeared there. Mrs. Simmons felt herself seized, and she screamed, or tempted to do so. That is all she remembers, save that something was pressed over her nose and mouth."

"Now, chief, have you told me all there is to tell? Is that the whole story?"

"Every bit of it."

"Didn't the coachman see the face of the man who held the pistol?"

"No; he wore a mask. Didn't I tell you that it was just like an abduction out of a novel?"

"What time did it occur? Be as exact as you can, because I have a reason for asking."

"About one o'clock. It is almost five now. She was about four hours ago."

"And an hour and a half ago the same person who planned and executed the abduction sent a bullet through the sleeve of my coat and grazed my arm," said Nick, quietly, raising his arm so that the round hole showed through the cloth.

The chief laughed ironically.

"It seems to me that you jump at conclusions, Carter," he said. "Of course I don't doubt that you were shot at; your sleeve shows that; but how in blazes can you pretend to know that the person who shot you was the same one who abducted Miss Danton?"

"Common magic, chief," laughed Nick. "I read her name in the smoke of the pistol she fired at me."

"Good heavens! You don't mean to suggest that the pretty woman——"

"Whom you set at liberty when you should have sent her to jail? No."

"Then what the devil do you mean?"

"I mean simply that it so happens that I know something about this woman who did the deed. Moreover she knows that I know she did it. She knew that I would know who did it, after it was done. Her name is Isabel Benton, and if she and the young lady whom she abducted happen to walk into this room together

...n now, I'll wager that you could not tell, with your ...es, which was which, even though you knew them ...th quite intimately. I do know them both, chief, ...d this won't be the first time I have championed Miss ...nton's cause against her enemy. But we have work ... do, and plenty of it, for I can assure you that Mer...des Danton is in grave danger at this moment."

CHAPTER V.

FACE TO FACE WITH AN AWFUL FATE.

"There is absolutely nothing that you can do, and ...ere is no further information which you can supply, ...hich will aid me at all in this case, chief," said Nick, ...ing. "A thousand clews leading to the contrary ...ould not alter my conviction that I know precisely ...o committed this act. It was Isabel Benton, the ...ing image, the counterpart, the very double of her ...ctim. Nor will I need aid in the work I have to do ... rescuing Mercedes Danton from her enemies. In ...rt, I want you to promise me that you will keep ...ur hands off. I want to work alone on this case."

"Why?"

"Because I think I can accomplish what must be ...e much better if I am unhampered. The woman ...o abducted Miss Danton is the smartest and the ...st daring of her kind. She has the courage and the ...source of a man; she has almost the strength of a ...an. Nothing daunts her. Why, this very act is ...roof of her fearlessness. She knew that I was in ...own; she knew that I would recognize her work in it. ...eave Brighton under my orders for the present, and ...n't expect to see me for a day or two."

"You are welcome to Brighton."

"I may need him and I may not. There may be no ...e for him at all. Just now, if it so happens that ...abel took her captive to the house in Lake View——"

"What the devil has she got to do with Mrs. Sun...erlin's house in Lake View?"

"Everything. She was the real Mrs. Sunderlin. ...e was the real burglar. She was the real 'it' of the ...ole outfit; that is all. As I was saying, if it so happens that she took her captive there, and she is in the house when Brighton gets there, he will have to look to himself, or you may find yourself short of a man."

"You don't mean that she would dare to murder him; shoot him from behind a door, or something like that, do you?"

"She would have no more hesitation in killing him, or you, or me, than she would in smashing a mosquito on the back of her hand."

"A nice, companionable sort of a woman that," muttered the chief.

"Ay," said Nick, "and a beautiful one, too. More beautiful even than Miss Dumont, if you can imagine such a thing."

"I cannot."

"Well," said Nick, slowly, and with cold sarcasm, "she is so beautiful that if I should arrest her this afternoon for abduction and leave her alone here with you, you would set her free inside half an hour—if you followed the precedent you have established."

"Look here, Carter——"

"Never mind," laughed the detective. "I'm only joshing you. I am very glad that you were kind to Miss Dumont, particularly glad, as things have turned out, for through her I hope to be able to lay my hands on Isabel Benton. So long, chief."

"Wait a minute, Carter. I——"

"I'll report the moment there is anything to tell. Good-afternoon."

* * * * * * *

Nick Carter had already determined on the course he was to adopt when he left the chief of police at his office, and therefore he was in no hurry.

The conduct of Isabel puzzled him greatly. Not that part of it which included the abduction, nor any one part of it, particularly, but the whole, taken together.

In summing up the case as he had received it, he could not disabuse his mind of the idea that she had planned every move made with a degree of nicety that was amazing; and if she had so planned every action, it remained a certainty that she had also prog-

nosticated his own acts, or at least, that she had worked on the supposition that she could figure almost exactly upon what he would do.

"Taking that view of the case," mused Nick, "she knew all the time that Cora was to send for me to meet her in the hotel parlor, and therefore Cora knew that Isabel knew it. Doubtless the whole thing was planned by Isabel in the beginning. I wonder if the letter was also a part of the plan? Can it be possible that Cora Tempest was a party to that letter?

"I'll have to pass over that point for the present," he continued, with wrinkled brows. "Let me get back to the abduction for a moment. Isabel had planned that ahead, of course. She also knew when she planned it that I would be in town. She had somebody in Lake Forest to notify her by telephone if the ladies left there on the train they expected to take. The rest was easy. She figured that I would be making my arrangements to leave town and that she would be safe to make the Sunderlin house her headquarters for a while, still. She has figured, also, that as soon as I heard of the abduction, whether I happened to be in Chicago or New York, that I would take her trail at once, and she has argued that I might as well be here as there; even better here, for then she would at least know where I was. She lied when she said in her letter that she did not intend to kill me. That was only an excuse for making a bad shot.

"Humph! Let me see what I can make out of it all.

"First, she knows of the arrest of Cora. Doubtless she was in the house in Lake View all the while—even when I was there. She was informed at once when Cora was released by the chief, and the two met there, in the hotel. She arranged for the meeting between Cora and me of a certainty, and—I see it now! She meant to be present at that meeting—concealed somewhere so that she could overhear all that occurred or was said. I'll have to take another look at that parlor. I think, for there must be an arrangement there so that she could hear us. Anyhow, the abduction detained her longer than she expected, and Cora sent for me before Isabel returned. Now, it is evident that she returned to the hotel because she did not dare to leave Cora out of her calculations. The abduction had already taken place, and we will say that Mercedes was at that time under guard at the house in Lake View.

"In order to listen to us, Isabel had provided herself with a bell boy's uniform, which she wore under her dress. She had a room at the hotel, doubtless, and she went there, dropped off her dress, donned a cap and came to the parlor where we were talking. If discovered in the act of listening, she figured that she could escape as a bell boy, and that without my having a good look at her to detect her.

"In that manner she crept upon us and managed to hear something of what we said. Then she fired the pistol, escaped to the room, donned her dress and went out upon the street.

"Of course she went directly then to the house in Lake View. What for? For what purpose did she go there? To take Mercedes away, or to await my coming? Here is where she began to bank upon what I would be likely to do, and here is where I must determine what she believed I would do, and then do something else.

"She has figured that I would send Cora back there. I did that very thing. She has figured that I would send a man there to precede me and to cover the ground. I did that also. I sent poor Brighton there, and if he is not dead I'll wager that she has managed to get the best of him. Next she has calculated that I would visit the house myself, sometime later in the day or evening, and knowing my habits fairly well, she has figured that I would probably go alone—which I will do.

"I begin to see daylight. She has argued that I would go alone, probably in the evening, and she has arranged so that I shall be killed, somehow. In short this whole thing is more a trap for Nick Carter than it is a crime against Mercedes Danton.

"Isabel knows that she can never be successful in her machinations against the fortune of Mercedes while I am alive, and she means to kill me, or to have me killed; it amounts to the same thing. But how?

"Will she shoot me down when I enter the house? Will she have somebody behind the door to drive

life through my heart as I enter? One or the other, identity. Either would be a joy to her.

"Cora, she will have admitted at once, and so I can ink of Cora as utterly in her power; I wonder if I ould think of her as Isabel's ally, also? Who knows?

"Let me get back again. Isabel figured that I would to the house in the evening; also that I would ply at the front door, hence she will be prepared for e at the front door. All right. I'll fool her this ne. I'll go there, but I'll wait till late at night. I'll there as a burglar: I'll break into the house as a rglar. I think I need not fear the burglar alarm to- ght, for she will take pains that it is not set to go off.

"One thing is certain: I must go to the that house and must enter it. If Cora is loyal, she will have left some ind of a clew for me to follow; if she has left nothing me, I will know that she has gone back to the ouse. Mercedes will have been taken away from the use long before I enter it, but there is the only place ere I can hope to find a clew which will lead me to r hiding place."

* * * * * * *

It was one o'clock that night when Nick Carter, dissed as a burglar, and with a bag containing a kit of modern burglar's tools slung under his arm, crept rough the dooryard of the Lake View house, and ving the mansion to the left, finally climbed stealthily upon the side porch and crept along the stoop ward the door.

He paused there and listened for a long time, but a sound of any sort came to him, and at last, apparently satisfied, he raised himself to his knees and began to work swiftly and carefully with his picklock.

He was not long in throwing the bolt back, but then, he pushed the door open, he found that it was guarded by a chain on the inner side, and he smiled grimly to himself as he thrust the nippers through the opening to cut it.

"Yes," he mused, "she knew exactly what she thought I would do."

Cutting out the chain, he stepped back out of reach from the inside wall while he pushed the door ajar, and then he waited.

Still there was no sound, and presently he entered the house and closed the door behind him. Then, with a quick motion he drew his electric searchlight from his pocket and pressed the button.

The sharp ray, directed by his hand, found every corner and crevice of the hallway, but discovered nothing to him, and, as he still heard no sound, he started through the hall toward the front of the house.

When he arrived opposite the library door he found that it was open, and he turned the light into it, searching everywhere. And then, as he lowered the gleaming finger to the floor he uttered an exclamation of amazement, for it fell full upon two figures that were lying side by side, stretched at full length in the middle of the room.

He was afforded sufficient time to see that there was a small round hole in the temple of the man, and to recognize, in the other figure, the form of Cora Tempest. He knew that the man was Brighton, and that he was dead, and he believed that Cora was also dead, killed by the same hand.

He took one step forward, toward them, and then—the whole world seemed to be shaken by a sudden convulsion; the house leaped from its foundations. There was a blinding flash, a heavy roar, and the surrounding walls collapsed upon him and them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WAKING TO CONSCIOUSNESS.

When Nick Carter opened his eyes to consciousness there were several moments in which he stared around him in wonder and amazement, for not only he had not the least idea where he was, but the past—or at least that part of it which concerned his presence in this unknown locality, seemed to have been swept entirely from his recollection.

Then, item by item, the events of the last few days began to return to him.

He remembered the work he had done in following

up the mysterious burglaries among the society people of Chicago, and then he recalled his interview with Cora Tempest in a private parlor of the Great Northern Hotel, the story of the abduction of Mercedes Danton, told to him by the chief of police, and finally, his midnight entrance to the house of Mrs. Sunderlin.

And then, of course, the memory of the explosion came back to him.

He remembered that he had been passing through the hallway of the house with his electric searchlight in his hand and that he had paused near the library door, throwing the light through the opening into that apartment.

He recalled also what he had seen there, on the floor the dead body of Brighton, the headquarters detective, with the bullet hole in his temple, and lying beside it, the silent form of Cora Tempest.

He remembered, too, that he was advancing into the room with the intention of ascertaining if she had also been slain, when the explosion came—when the walls of the house seemed to fall in upon him, when the earth quaked and he was knocked down and buried beneath a mass of falling débris.

Ah, yes; it all came back to him now.

"But," he marveled, "all that happened in the middle of the night; now it is broad daylight, and—why, I'm in bed."

If you who read this have ever been so unfortunately placed that you have awakened from a period of unconsciousness to find yourself in a strange place, and with your recollection of past events represented by vague and uncertain shadows, you will know something of the strangeness which swept over Nick Carter, usually so strong, so well, and so thoroughly in the possession of all his faculties.

He looked around him with great care, his first instinct being to determine where he was rather than how he was, for he had not attempted to move yet, and it had not occurred to him in his waking to consciousness that he had been injured.

But that hasty glance around the room revealed nothing more than might have been contained in any other strange room to which he might have been conveyed.

It was a very large room—evidently situated in a proportionately large house—and it was richly furnished. He was positive, however, that it was not part of a hospital.

"Hospital!" He wondered for an instant why that word had occurred to him, and then—well, then it came over him in a rush of recollection that he had really been a part and parcel of that terrible explosion, that it was he upon whom the walls had fallen, that he was the person who had been blown up, and that he was the intended victim of that disaster which had been without doubt a part of a plan to assassinate him.

"It's a wonder that I am alive at all," he mused. "Now, I wonder how many bones are broken; I wonder if I have lost a leg, or an arm, or a foot, or a hand, or—anything. I'll give them each a try, and see."

It did not take him long to determine that his limbs and arms were sound, even if they were stiff and sore, but when he pushed back the covers and attempted to rise, he discovered that only with great difficulty and pain could he move at all.

He was on the point of raising his voice to call out for somebody to come to him, when the door opened and a negro woman, of proportions so huge that she could only with extreme difficulty pass through the doorway, entered the room.

Instantly she perceived that her patient was awake and conscious, and she hastened to the bedside.

"Glory to goodness, honey, you is done woke up, ain't yo'?" she exclaimed, standing like a colossal ebon statue beside him.

"Yes, auntie," replied Nick, smiling, "to the best of my knowledge, I is done woke up for sure. Would you mind telling me where I am?"

"Huh! Why, honey, you is right yere—right yere in dis bed, in dis house, in dis kentry, an' in dis worl'. Did yo' think, honey, dat yo' is done gone to de udder worl'?"

"Well," replied Nick, "I thought last night that

nd taken a pretty good start for one of the other rlds."

'Las' night! Huh! Yo' was right yere las' night, ney."

"Oh, was I? How long have I been here, auntie?"

'Ebber since night afore las'."

'Have I, indeed! And what time is it now?"

"It am creepin' along right smart towards noon."

"Now tell me where I am. Where is this house lo ed?"

"Tain't located at all, nohow. Nebber heerd dat was located. Golly, honey, does yo' spec dat I uld stay here for all de gol' in de worl' ef dis yere use was located. I don't want no spooks aroun' whar : no sah!"

"Are we in Chicago, auntie?"

"I dunno, honey. What's dat ar' at? I ain't nebber l of no Chicago. Yo' jes' hear to me chile, while ls yo' something. I ain't no dictionary, an' I ain't graphy, an' I ain't no phonygraph, either. I's jes' de chambermaid, de housekeeper and de nurse; 't's all I is. If yo' want to find out a heap o' things utt dis yere house bein' located yo jes' wait till Miss ora, 'r Miss Is'bel come aroun' and den yo'll fin' out, re nuff."

"Ah!" said Nick, with a sigh of relief that he had last elicited something in the way of information om the black woman. "Are they both here in the use?"

"Who's bofe in de house, I'd like to know? Mis' bel is done gone to de city wif de otermobilia, and s' Cora, she's—well, she ain't been feelin' any too art since dat ar' 'splosion business, an' she's restin' de couch in de udder room."

"Ah! She is here, then?"

"Didn't Ah say she was yere from de fust?"

"I guess you did, auntie. Would you be kind nough to ask her to come here a moment? I want to lk to her."

"Huh! Yo' ain't de onliest gemlen who wants to lk to Mis' Cora, Ah reckon. Ef I war a man, Ah'd nt to talk to her, too, an' I'd talk to her mighty ickline, Ah would. Sure, Ah'll send her yere, honey; an' Ah reckon she'll be mighty glad to come, 'cos she ain't done nuffin all day yesterday and all dis mawnin' but ax me ober and ober ag'in, 'Auntie, how's dat ar' gemlen gittin' erlong?' And Ah tell her eb'ry time dat you is gittin' erlong right smart, sure I does, honey; an' den when she done knows dat you is gittin' erlong right smart an' is goin' ter be up an' a arskin' f'r yo' rations befor' de week am two days older, why, honey, she jes' smiles an' shows dem purty teeth of hern, an' de good wahm blood puff out her lil' cheeks an' make 'em look like roses what is jes' picked from de vine when de dew of de mawnin' is done made 'em fresh an' glad; dat what she does, when she hears dat you is better; an' ef Ah war in yo' shoes, Ah'd—Ah'd frow up my hat higher'n de top of de ol' meetin' house steeple, of de Mefodis' chu'ch, Souf; dat's what I'd do."

"But suppose your arms happened to be so lame that you couldn't throw up your hat; what would you do in that case?"

"Den, by golly, Ah'd kick it up."

"But my legs are lame, too."

"Well, Ah dunno what Ah would do in such a case; but sho's yo' is bo'n, I'd git it up somehow, an' right smart, too; dat Ah would! Dat Ah would!"

"And now will you ask Miss Cora to come here?"

"Sure Ah'll arsk her, honey."

"Now! Right away!"

"Golly, but you is eager. I reckon ef it wasn't fo' dem ar' lame arms an' laigs, you'd frow up dat hat, all right, honey. I reckon. I reckon."

And chuckling to herself in evident glee over her wise utterance, she left the room to summon Cora Tempest to Nick's side; and Nick, still wondering at the turn of affairs, watched the door through which she disappeared until it was opened again, and the aperture was filled by the most exquisite vision of grace and beauty that could be desired to brighten the solitude of a wounded and momentarily helpless man.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DYNAMITE TRAP.

Cora crossed the room rapidly to the bedside and paused there; then, tenderly and with a hesitation which could have been born of nothing but modesty, she stretched forth one hand and touched the detective on the brow.

"You are better?" she asked, speaking in a low tone that was full of tenderness.

"I suppose so," replied Nick. "The fact is I have no idea whether I am better or worse, for the very good reason that I haven't an idea of anything that has happened since the instant when I stopped at the library door and discovered you lying on the floor there, unconscious; perhaps dead. I haven't the least idea what happened after that, save that the walls of the house seemed to cave in upon me: but old auntie says that I have been here since the night before last, so it is safe to suppose that I am, at least, better than I have been."

She was stroking his forehead gently and seemed anxiously to hear all that he had said.

"Won't you pull up a chair and sit here beside me?" asked Nick. "I think there are about a million questions which I would like to ask you, but, doubtless, you will be able to forestall many of them by telling me what has really happened, and where I am at present."

Cora drew a chair to the bedside and seated herself upon it. Then she deliberately—and with apparent unconsciousness—took possession of one of his hands and held it tightly in her own.

"You do not know, then, that you saved my life, do you?" she asked.

"I don't see how I could have done that," replied Nick.

"You did it, nevertheless. When the explosion came you threw yourself forward upon me, so that your body entirely covered mine. I saw you do it, for consciousness was just returning to me when you came to the door and threw the light into the room. I had only fainted, and the fact is, nobody knows that I am alive. I think I heard you come through the hall toward the library, and I think I tried to rouse myself in order to call out a warning to you, but my tongue was tied, and my muscles would not obey my will. Then you appeared in the doorway and discovered the dead body of the man you had sent to meet me; then—don't you remember—you started toward me with a cry of warning, and you threw yourself forward upon me. Don't you remember?"

"Vaguely," admitted Nick. "Nothing that happened then is very clear to me now."

"If you had not done that I would have been killed, or, at least, disfigured. The ceiling and the walls fell in upon us, and you were terribly bruised, but not by a brick or a stone, or a piece of plaster touched me; not one that had not first spent its force upon your body. The doctor who attended you said that your back was a mass of bruises, but that, save for the soreness and lameness resulting from them, you are not injured."

"Thank you," replied Nick. "I think, with your help, I could get up now and get about, too, if it were necessary; but, Cora, I want to have a talk with you, and it is quite as well that I should remain where I am for the present, I suppose. I see that those windows are barred; I did not discover it at first. Am I a prisoner here?"

"Yes; we are both prisoners."

"Indeed! And is Isabel our jailer?"

"Yes."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know, only that she went away early this morning."

"Are you really a prisoner, Cora? Or are you merely playing a part in this conspiracy?"

"You doubt me, don't you?"

"Yes; and why not? You deceived me about the letter. You knew that the letter was to be sent to me; have wondered also if you knew beforehand exactly what its contents were to be."

"No. I swear that I did not."

"Hush! Do not swear. We won't dwell upon the letter now. There are other things of more importance. Tell me, how came you inside that house?"

curred? How did it happen that you away in the library where the dead body of Brighton was lying? How came you there? ay you fainted. Is that true?"

es."

ll me about it. Tell me all that happened to you we parted at the hotel."

did as you directed me to do. I whiled away an or two so that I would not arrive at the house too and then I went to Lake View. I did not know ther I would find Isabel there or not, but she was awaiting me.

discovered at once that she had heard more of the rsation between you and me, at the hotel, than I ved at the time, and that she was correspondingly . She——"

ever mind what she had heard; I do not care her reasons for doing things; I wish to know she did after that."

ked me in the library. Then, after an hour e came back into the room, and, with the aid he men in her employ, tied me to one of the airs at the library table. I was not uncomfortbut it was impossible for me to move. I could get out of the chair, but I could move it around place to place with comparative ease.

ust before dark, your man came from police headters. He told me afterward that his name was hton. He had walked as deliberately into captivas a mouse might go into a trap. She had capd him when he presented the card from you, and was bound hand and foot when he was brought into library.

She had him placed on the couch, and then, when had sent the others out of the room, she fixed a w under his head.

'You two will be delightful company for each er,' she said, with one of her cruel smiles; 'and toht, later, when Nick Carter comes here to do his ing, I will have arranged a little reception for you that will be distinctly interesting.'

Then she left us alone together. It had not occurred to Isabel, evidently, that I could move across the floor at will in the big chair in which I was tied, but as soon as she went out of the room, I told Brighton that I could do so. He suggested that I remain where I was until later, and that, after all was quiet, I make an effort to free him.

"It was fortunate that we did wait, for she was gone only a short time when she returned again.

"She paid no attention whatever to Brighton, but addressed herself to me.

" 'Cora,' she said, 'when traitors threaten the success of my plans, and even my liberty, they inevitably meet with the same fate—one fate—death. That you have been a traitor, and have betrayed me to Nick Carter, I knew all the time, but I did not understand that you had actually joined the side against me until the arrival of this man. As it is, I have arranged a comfortable little reception for Nick Carter when he comes here to this house to-night, as he will come. I don't know whether he will walk up to the front door and ring the bell as anybody else would do, or not; it is possible that he may attempt to enter by stealth; at all events, he will have to force his way in when he does come, as there will be nobody to admit him. When he comes into the house, he will naturally search it, and he will find you and his spy in this room. He will think he is about to rescue you, and he will hasten forward from the door toward you—but he will never reach your side.'

" 'Why not?' I demanded.

" 'Because I have fixed up a little plan which will stop him forever, when he is half way to you,' she replied, with her eyes gleaming strangely.

"She pointed to a hole that had been bored through the floor, and from which a wire protruded into the room.

" 'Do you see that wire?' she asked me. 'It connects with a battery in the cellar, and that battery, in turn, is connected with ten pounds of dynamite which I have caused to be placed directly under this room. Do you begin to understand? When I have everything arranged, I shall stretch a thread from the end of that wire to the bookcase, so that it will pass directly in front of the door and about a foot from the floor.

Don't you understand yet?' she asked again, laughing aloud. 'Will I have to be more explicit? Well, the least pressure against the thread will pull the wire to which it is fastened, and that will cause the wire to come in contact with another wire. When the two wires touch, the connection will be formed—the spark will be created—the dynamite will be exploded, and, pouf! you will all go up in the air together. Beautiful, isn't it? And the great beauty of it all is that Nick Carter will set it off himself. He will kill himself and you. I shall be far away, attending to my own affairs, and he simply comes here, breaks into this house where he has no business to come, touches off the mine himself, and by his own act, rids me of all my worst enemies at once. Beautiful, isn't it? All I have to do is to fix everything for the tragedy, and then go my way. I leave the door open so that he will find you at once, when he enters the house. He will start forward toward you. That beautiful and touching love-scene I saw enacted at the Great Northern will recur to him. He will rush toward you; his foot will touch the thread, and the pressure will be so light that he will not know that he has touched it; but it will be sufficient to move the wire and bring it in contact with the other one. Selah! All is over! The walls will fall in upon you.'

"She laughed aloud then, and went out of the room.

"At once I began edging my chair across the floor toward Mr. Brighton."

"Too soon," said Nick. "You should have waited until she went out of the house."

"But I could not wait. It was all too horrible."

"Brighton should have made you wait."

"Ah! he was as eager as I. But wait till I tell you the rest."

"Go on."

"I managed to get the chair across the room, and I worked with might and main at the cords which bound Mr. Brighton. I managed to loosen them, and, presently, with all his strength strained against them, he managed to complete the effort, and he raised himself to his feet, free."

"And then?" asked Nick.

"Then is when the first tragedy occurred. He had scarcely straightened himself when the door opened and Isabel stood in the entrance. She was smiling and she held a revolver in her hand.

"The instant when Brighton saw that we were discovered, he started toward her, but she calmly raised the revolver and fired; and Brighton, shot through the temple, fell to the floor, a corpse—killed before my eyes.

"I fainted away in the chair when that was done, and when I opened my eyes again, my chair was moved back to its original position, and the corpse of Brighton was lying upon the floor between me and the open door. In the doorway Isabel was standing, and she pointed at the thread she had stretched across the room, from the wire to the bookcase.

"I tried to cry out, but found that I had been gagged, and that I could not utter a sound. Then she went away, leaving the door open—

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER'S PLAN OF ESCAPE.

"When she had gone," continued Cora, "I must have fainted again; but when I recovered, I was in utter darkness. The house was as silent as death. I was still bound, gagged and helpless in the chair near the library table, and I knew, although I could not see it, that the corpse of Brighton was stretched upon the floor near me.

"You can imagine with what frenzy I strove to free myself; but for a long time my efforts were made without result.

"I think I must have gone mad then. At least I must have become possessed of the strength of a dozen person, for I succeeded in bursting the bonds that held me. I tore the gag from my mouth. I freed my feet from the ropes that held me. I leaped to my feet, and then I remembered that slender thread that was stretched between me and the door, which, to me, meant death—sudden, terrible, awful death.

"The thought of it appalled me—paralyzed me—I stopped where I stood. Then I remembered the

...ght on; and then—then everything became blacker ...en than the awful darkness with which I was sur...ounded—then I must have fainted away.

"You know the rest. You know how you entered ...e room, and you know now what it was that set ...f the dynamite. Your foot touched the thread, when ...ou approached me, and you threw yourself upon me, ...nstinctively trying to protect a woman, even in that ...stant of awfulness. And you did save me. The ...ebris which fell upon you would have crushed the ...e out of me. But I am alive. The shock has been ...rrible—awful, but I am recovering from it."

"Never mind that now, Cora," said Nick. "Tell me ...e rest."

"I don't know the rest, save that I awoke to con...sciousness here, just as you did. I suppose that Isabel ...ained us. It may be that we were taken from the ...ins before others arrived. Possibly she was wait...g somewhere to take us away, remembering that I ...d been left there tied in a chair and that one of her ...ictims had been shot through the head before the ...plosion occurred. She does not care to have more ...mes than are necessary known against her."

"Probably not."

"I know that we are here in this old farmhouse, ...t where it is located I do not know, save that it is ...t far from Chicago. The old negress with her hus...nd and her son are our guards, and they serve Isabel ...faithfully as dogs, knowing no other authority than ...s. If we should make an effort to escape, they will ...ght it even to the point of killing us. I know that. ...Isabel reckoned that you are not able to do much, ...and as an extra precaution, your clothing has been re...oved."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Nick. "Who but a woman ...uld have thought of such an expedient as that?"

"Isabel thought of it. She told me that a man ...s not amount to much without his clothing. 'Even ...k Carter will be helpless without his trousers,' she ...d, laughing. 'Not that I think he would be able ...o much, even if he had them, but without them he ...ll be like a child in apron strings.' Then she went ...ay."

"Cora," said Nick, slowly, "you have not mentioned the name of Mercedes Danton."

"Why should I?"

"Don't you know that Isabel abducted her?"

"No."

"And took her to the house where the explosion occurred?"

"No."

"Are you telling me the truth, Cora?"

"As God is my judge I am telling you the whole truth as far as I know it."

"Mercedes Danton was abducted by Isabel. Never mind how, when or where, now. It is enough that she was stolen away. It may be that she is in this house now. How large a house is it, and how much of it is open to you?"

"How much of it is open to me?" Cora laughed. "We are in one wing of the house. There is a small room between this one and the one I occupy, and we are confined to these three rooms. This place was built for a private sanitarium. It is like a prison."

"I understand," said Nick. "Do you suppose the negress could be bribed?"

"No. I am positive that it is impossible."

"Do you know when Isabel intends to return?"

"No. Probably this evening."

"Where is the negress now?"

"She has gone into another part of the house. She will not return unless I ring for her."

"Have you any idea what was done with my clothes?"

"No. They were taken to some other part of the house."

"And we are shut off in this part of it?"

"Entirely. One has to go downstairs to the ground floor before entrance to the other part of the house can be obtained, and the door which opens on the stairs is of iron."

"Humph! We are supposed to have free access between these three rooms, are we not?"

"Why—yes—I am, of course; but you ——"

Cora came to a pause and blushed. Nicked laughed aloud.

"I have no clothes. Is that what you were about to add?"

"Yes."

"Well, I propose to have some clothes at once. I don't know just how, as yet, but I shall not be kept here by the fact that my clothing has been stolen away. I'm going to get out of this and take you with me, and that without much delay. I can rig up a fairly good outfit out of these bedclothes, if it comes to a pinch."

"But you are wounded. You are not able to do anything."

"Bosh! I am lame and sore, I grant; but I am worth a whole lot of dead men, yet; and I shouldn't wonder if I could give a fairly good account of myself with a few live ones, if I had the opportunity. What have you got in the way of clothing? Anything?"

"I? Why I—I am fully dressed."

"Bless you, I know that; but could you dress twice? I mean, have you any extra clothes?"

"No. Nothing. You could not use them if I had them."

"Well, since you haven't got them, it is quite certain that I cannot use them. Look here, Cora, you return now to your own room, stay there ten minutes, and then return here. I want a chance to find out how these muscles of mine will work. Have you a clock or a watch in there?"

"No."

"Then count a thousand before you return. Rap on the door when you are coming back, so I will have a chance to get under cover. Go now."

As soon as Nick was alone, he threw the bedclothing back, and, while still lying at full length on his back, began to work with his arms and legs.

At first he moved them only with great effort and pain, but gradually as the circulation returned, he found that he was not nearly so severely injured as he had supposed. It is true that he could not move without pain, and considerable pain at that, but he could move, and he could bear the pain.

Presently he got out of the bed and stood erect beside it. He felt as if he had been put through a threshing machine, but, after he had taken several turns up and down the room, working his arms and head, and pausing at every step to rub his legs, he began to feel that a very little exercise of that kind would put him "on earth" again; and in his anxiety to accomplish something, he crossed to the window and examined the bars which protected it.

Every one was securely fastened, and he returned again to the bed, for already he had an idea which he could work it out, would result not only in gaining his liberty, but also in providing him with clothes, for he felt that clothes were what he most needed in order to escape.

The bedstead was of iron, fortunately, and everybody knows that almost all iron bedsteads are made of sections of iron tubing, manufactured so that they will fit interchangeably, and that they are fastened together in the form of a bedstead as gas pipe is fastened, that is, simply by screwing two ends tightly together.

It was not long before he had succeeded in disconnecting one of the lengths of piping from the bedstead, and presently he felt that he had secured a very respectable weapon—a piece of iron tubing eighteen inches long, and sufficiently heavy to crack the skull of a man without much effort.

"Good!" he said to himself. Then he climbed back into the bed, taking the piece of iron with him. Then he drew the clothes over him, and again assumed the former position on his back, but this time with the iron weapon grasped firmly in his right hand under the bedclothes.

He had just completed these arrangements when Cora tapped at the door, and entered the room when he bade her do so.

"I'm a rather lively specimen yet," he said, with a smile, as she approached the bedside. "Now, Cora, I want you to follow my directions implicitly."

"I will do whatever you tell me to do," she replied.

"Good. I want you to return to your own room and ring the bell for the nurse. When she comes—By the way, is that one of hers here?"

es."

s he a grown man?"

he's almost as big as you are—bigger, I think."

That's all right. Now, when she comes in reply to summons, tell her that I want her to send her and or her son to me at once. Tell her that I a man; understand?"

es."

ee to it that she sends one of them—I don't care h one. Does the stairway come up into the room een this one and yours?"

es."

Well, that's all right. You listen when he comes this room. Listen hard, and you'll hear some- drop; but don't get frightened. It won't be I drops. After that, keep on listening with all your but don't enter the room—this room—till I call . Then come in."

What are you going to do?"

m going to lay out that nigger, put on his clothes, im in this bed, and—well, after that, we will see is best to be done."

an you do it in your weakened condition?" she d, in some alarm.

o it? All I want is to get that nigger into the —the husband or the son, I don't care which. 't want two, though. You make old auntie send r her men to me, and I'll do the rest."

CHAPTER IX.

PRISONERS IN A BLAZING HOUSE.

was a full half hour later when, without ceremony announcement of any kind, the door of the room oc- ied by the detective was opened and a powerfully- young negro entered the room.

ck thought, when he first saw the fellow, that he never seen a more repulsive countenance in his life, rtainly there was some excuse for it. At some d in his existence the fellow had had the smallpox, his face was frightfully pitted. Add to that the that his nose was twisted to one side of his face, lost half of it had been cut away in some fight, and you have a partial idea of the black and ugly countenance which protruded itself into the room.

"I ain't got no time to fool away with white trash," was his greeting, as he entered. "I ain't gwine take no orders from you. My ol' mammy sent me. What do you want?"

"I want you to help me out of bed," replied Nick, grasping the iron bar tighter in his fingers underneath the bedclothes.

"What fo' you git up? Yo' is better off whar you is, white man."

"I want to get up, just the same," replied Nick, smiling at him. "I want you to take the clothes off the bed, and then lift my legs out on the floor. Then help me over to that chair near the window and wrap a blanket around me. If I had a dollar I'd give it to you, and if you know where my clothes are you may help yourself."

"Ef you'll ask Miss Izzy to give me a dollar, I'll help you."

"I'll do that," replied Nick.

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you first to pull the bedclothes back off my feet," replied Nick, pushing the iron bar still farther under one of his legs so that the negro would not see it when the clothes were removed.

"All right; now what?" asked the negro, as with one quick jerk he flung the coverings across the room.

"Now," said Nick, still fingering the bar, and grasping it even more tightly, "take hold of my feet and lift them around, out of the bed. Look out, there. Go easy. Don't forget that I have been hurt. Here, turn around this way, and take hold from this side. So. That's the way. Now lift them slowly and easily, and turn me slowly around, or you won't get any dollar. Ouch! Look out! Begin over again. Bend down a little lower. So. There. Now lift them very slowly and easily."

The negro's back was turned.

He stood in such a position that it was impossible for him to see that the detective moved his arm, and that was the moment for which Nick Carter had prepared.

Nerved to desperation by the plight he was in, the detective forgot that he was partly crippled by the accident he had passed through, and with a quick motion he raised the iron bar high over his head.

The next instant it fell with a crashing thud, fairly upon the crown of the negro's head.

Big and powerful as the man was, and tough as his head might have been, it could not withstand a blow like that.

He fell like a bullock in a slaughter house, stricken with an ax.

He did not cry out nor utter a sound; he just slipped to the floor beside the bed, and he laid there, silent and motionless.

"I hope I didn't kill him," was Nick Carter's thought, as he leaped from the bed to the floor, forgetting, in the excitement of the moment, that he was wounded and sore.

It did not take him long then to turn the negro over and divest him of his outer clothing. Fortunately Nick had not been deprived of his own undergarments, and once the negro was stripped, Nick heaved him into the bed in his own place, and gathering up the bedding, covered him carefully.

Then, with many expressions of disgust that the exigency of the moment should require such a sacrifice, he put on the clothing he had taken from the negro.

Within ten minutes from the time the blow fell the detective was dressed in the negro's garments; and as soon as that was accomplished, he stepped to the door and opened it.

Cora was waiting there for him, with her hands clasped together, her face white and drawn, and her entire aspect indicating a terror much greater than the circumstances warranted, the detective thought.

"Thank God you succeeded!" she exclaimed, as soon as she saw him, and seeming not to notice that he moved with as much apparent freedom as if he had not been hurt at all. "Did he tell you what he had done?"

"Did who tell me? What?"

"The nigger. Did he tell you? Oh, I pretended not to believe him. I laughed at his story, but I know it is only too true. I know Isabel so well. I kno that she would not hesitate even at a thing so horrib as this."

"What are you talking about, Cora? What do y mean?"

"Then the negro did not tell you?"

"He told me nothing except that he didn't want serve me. He was plain enough about that."

"Listen. Let me tell you all. When I rang t bell the first time nobody answered it. Then I ra again and again, many times, and at last Ben cam I was standing here, near the stairway door, waiti for him, for I expected that his mother would co When he came to the door instead, I asked for he He told me that she had gone away, and then he adde with a grin that was horrible to see, 'Miss Izzy wo need her here no more, missy. Dere won't be no for nobody here, after to-day. We's all gwine aw De ole man an de ole woman done gone alre

"What did he mean by that?" asked Nick. "Did tell you?"

"Yes; that is, he didn't exactly tell me; he o hinted at it. I'll tell you just what he said."

"Tell it in your own way. Don't try to quote hi

"He told me that Isabel had no more use for t house. That she had decided it was better to b it down than anything else. 'There are a lot of thi here, as well as white trash that she wants to get of,' he said. I asked him what he meant, and he I would find out as soon as it began to get go hot around here."

"He meant that they were going to burn the down, and burn us up inside it," said Nick. "T much is plain enough."

"Yes; but there is more. I asked him what he me by white trash, and he replied that you and I were the only ones. 'Dere's anudder missy besides you t he said. 'She look exactly like Miss Izzy; so like her——' Ah! You know who he meant?"

"Mercedes!" exclaimed Nick. "He meant Mercedes was in this house, a prisoner, and that he been directed to burn the house down, and that y and I, and Mercedes Danton were to be cremate

flames. I see it all now. Fortunately I have ...ered his little game in time, fortunately——"

"But even that is not all," cried Cora, seizing him by ...e shoulders and shaking him, as if to make him com...hend what she had not yet told him, for her ex...ement was so great that she could not realize that ...was not as fully informed as herself.

"What more?" asked the detective.

"He has already set the house afire."

"What!" exclaimed Nick.

"He was putting the match to it when I rang for him ...r for his mother—to come here."

"How do you know that?"

"He said so."

"What did he say? Tell me all he said."

"He said he couldn't come any quicker because he ...s busy starting the fire, and that he couldn't stay ...because, although the fire was started in the other ...g of the old house, it wouldn't take long for it to ...here, because the house was saturated with kerosene ...."

Suddenly she uttered a scream and pointed toward ...window behind Nick; and, turning, he saw that a ...vy volume of smoke was drifting past it.

With a bound he leaped to the window and raised ...and, although the heavy iron bars prevented him ...m thrusting out his head in order to see, he could ...r the crackling of the flames which had already ...t from the windows of the other wing of the house, ...t also, although he did not know it then, from the ...r part of the building also.

"We must work quickly now," said Nick, coolly. ...Mercedes Danton is in that other wing of the ...se, there is not a moment to lose. Is this door ...ocked?"

He leaped to the door which opened on the stairs ...d shook it, but it resisted his efforts.

"It fastens with a spring lock," said Cora. "Ben ...s had the keys in his pocket."

But Nick Carter was already searching the pockets ...the clothing he wore—and he searched them in vain, ...t not a sign of keys could be found in anyone of ...m.

He seized the door then, and shook it again, violently, and they could both plainly hear the rattling of keys against the outside of it.

Cora raised her eyes to his inquiringly, and for an instant he averted his own. Then, in a tone that was perfectly quiet, he said:

"Courage, Cora. You need it now. The plain truth of the matter is that the negro forgot to take his keys from the outside of the door when he came in here, and that he inadvertently locked himself in here to perish with us—if perish we must."

"Then there is no way of escape for us?" she asked.

She had suddenly become as calm as she had been excited only a moment before. She was still pale, but there was not a trace of a tremor about her now—not one.

"Yes," he replied. "I think there is one, if you will help me—and will be brave and keep calm and cool."

"I am not brave; but I am calm and cool. I will help you," she said, slowly. "I do not fear death, if I must meet it. Tell me what to do."

"Come," he said, in reply.

Then he turned back into the room where he had left the negro. In an instant he had dumped the black out of the bed upon the floor and wrapped the blankets around him. The next he had seized the bedstead and was taking it apart.

It required only a moment to secure one of the heavy side arms of the bed frame—a strong and heavy iron bar it made, too—and in less time than it requires to tell of it, he had leaped to the window, dashed out the glass and sash, and inserted the heavy side arm between the bars of the window.

Even those heavy bars could not withstand that pressure, and in a moment more the way to liberty was open before them.

CHAPTER X.

A QUEEN OF HER KIND.

It required but a moment to make the opening large enough to permit them to pass through it, and another for Nick Carter to return to the bedclothes and with all speed to knot some of the blankets together.

In an instant, then, he tied one end of the rope thus manufactured around Cora, under her arms, and then he seized her and lifted her to the sill of the window.

But she clung there and turned back, facing him.

"Yourself! What will you do?" she asked.

"I will fasten one end of it here, and let myself down after you. It is too far for you to jump," he said, "and too far for me, too, with my injured legs; and I may have need of them. Quick. We must save Mercedes Danton."

"And the negro? Will you leave him here to perish?"

For reply, he pushed her from the window, and before she could utter another protest he lowered her to the ground. Then he fastened the blanket rope to one of the remaining bars and was about to follow her through the window when he remembered the negro.

"The devil would have burned us without a qualm," he muttered, "but I can't let him burn for all that."

In an instant he returned again to the spot where the negro was stretched on the floor under the bedding which Nick had thrown over him, and, hastily wrapping the senseless form in a blanket carried it to the window and dropped it, as he would a bag of grist, to the ground.

And then he followed.

"Run to the other wing, Cora," he ordered, as soon as he touched the ground.

She obeyed him, and then, having dragged the unconscious form out of the way of falling walls, he left it there and followed her.

When he arrived at the other wing of the house, it was already a mass of flames, and it did not seem as if anything living could exist in any one of the rooms of that part of the building.

Nevertheless, Nick Carter did not hesitate.

The front door of the main building stood wide open, and, bidding Cora to remain where she was, Nick leaped through the smoke and disappeared inside the house.

As he entered, he discovered that the hall ran directly through the house, and that the rear door was also open; he saw, also, against the light of the open door—for the reader must remember that all this happened in broad daylight—an ax leaning against the doorpost, and in a second he had secured it and was bounding up the stairs toward the second floor.

Then he remembered that the other wing of the house, where he had been confined, could be approached through the house only on the ground floor, and he turned and was about to descend again when from beyond the wall that was directly in front of him he heard loud cries for help, uttered in a woman's voice.

Maddened by what appeared to be his utter helplessness in the emergency, Nick raised the ax and struck a violent blow against the partition with it; and then he uttered an exclamation of surprise, for that blow told him that the wall was not of plaster and brick, but simply a board partition that had been papered over.

Instantly he attacked it with all his strength, raining blow after blow upon it with his ax, so that in a few seconds he had reduced it to a mass of splinters, and inside of three minutes from the time he attacked it he had succeeded in making an opening through which he could easily pass.

A burst of flame and a cloud of black smoke met him as he attempted to pass through, but he held his breath and continued on his way, for he knew that somebody was there, and he had not a doubt in his own mind that it was Mercedes Danton.

The room was filled to suffocation with smoke, and the heat was intense. He could hear the roaring and the crackling of the flames on every side of him, and through the black smoke, made lurid by the glare of fire, he caught one glimpse of a burning bed on which the form of a woman was stretched, fully dressed, but bound down to the mattress with knotted sheets that had been passed around it over her limbs and her body.

The bed was already enveloped in flames, and the clothing of the woman had begun to burn, and any spectator, had there been one, it would have looked like certain death for a rescuer to attempt to save the intended victim from her awful fate.

But it was not in Nick Carter to hesitate when he was a duty to perform.

He had to think quickly and to act quickly—and he did both.

Leaping forward he seized the pillows from the bed, and with them dashed out the flames which had already set fire to the woman's clothing, and then, forgetting in that great emergency that he had been injured, and that he was not possessed of his usual enormous strength—indeed, it seemed as if for that moment he was stronger than ever—he seized the blazing mattress to which the victim was bound, and, tearing it and its occupant from the bed frame, held the woman against his own body and the thick mattress in front of them, and so made his way against the driving smoke and awful flames, back through the hole he had cut in the wall, out into the main building, down the stairs, through the front hall and into the door yard, and there, thirty yards from the house, he dropped them both to the ground, and, ripping off the negro's coat, which he still wore, he began with all his might to beat out the still leaping flames which would have consumed her.

It was then that Cora Tempest sprang to his aid.

She also beat at the flames, and after a moment, when Nick saw that they were conquered, he tore the unconscious form of the woman he had saved, from the mattress, and carried it still farther from the burning house.

"Water," he said to Cora. "Bring water from somewhere;" and Cora dashed away toward a well, where, fortunately, there was a bucket, well filled, hanging on the windlass.

She returned with it as quickly as possible, and Nick, seizing it, dashed the contents over the unconscious and tortured young woman.

"Help me, Cora," he said. "It is Mercedes."

"The woman you love," said Cora, coldly, drawing back.

"A young woman, like yourself, who is suffering—who needs your good heart, not your bad one, Cora," replied, bending over Mercedes, whose eyelids were fluttering with returning consciousness.

"See," he added, "her hair is all burned away. Her face is scorched and seared, but I do not think it will be scarred. Her hands are burned, too. Ah! how she will suffer."

He bent still lower over her, and, as her eyelids fluttered again, he said, close to her ear:

"Mercedes! Mercedes! It is I; Nick Carter. Don't you hear me? You are safe now. You are burned a little, but not badly. Open your eyes. Your face is scorched and very red from the heat, and your hair is burned a little, but you will not be scarred by it. Mercedes, cannot you speak?"

He feared that she had swallowed so much smoke that she was in danger of suffocation. He dreaded lest she had inhaled the flames and was injured much more severely than he could discover with his eyes; but in a moment more he was reassured.

She opened her eyes and tried to look up at him; then she smiled.

"Mercedes," he said again, in a low tone.

"Yes," she replied.

"Are you suffering? Are you in great pain?" he asked.

"I can bear it," she replied, in a weak voice which he could not recognize—which sounded strangely unlike her own, but knowing what a terrible ordeal she had passed through, that fact was not strange. "I can bear it; but there is pain; but only my face and hands. Will my face be scarred, do you think?"

"No, no," he replied. "It is not burned badly enough for that. Only the outside skin is singed and discolored. It will leave no mark."

"Did you rescue me?" she asked, in a low tone.

"Yes. Thank God I arrived in time."

"I thought I would be burned to death," she murmured. "That horrible negro——" she shuddered and closed her eyes again.

"Say no more about it," admonished Nick. "It was a terrible ordeal, but it is past now."

"How did you escape?" she asked, suddenly.

"I?" asked Nick. "Did you know that I was a prisoner here, also?"

"Yes."

Nick felt a hand on his shoulder at that moment, and turning, he discovered that Cora was bending over them both, and that her eyes were suffused with tears.

"Forgive me," she whispered. "I will attend to her now. There are people coming. They have seen the fire and they have come to help, when there is nothing left to be done."

"At least, they can help us to get Mercedes to some place of safety and comfort," said the detective, rising.

Cora dropped on her knees beside the suffering young woman on the ground, and Nick turned away to meet the half dozen men who were rushing toward them, and who were still some distance away. He met them and stopped them at some distance from the spot where Mercedes was attended by Cora.

"The house is a heap of ruins, as you can see," he said, simply. "There is absolutely nothing you can do here now, save to get a conveyance and a doctor as quickly as possible. A young lady has been injured, and burned in the fire. Whose house is nearest, and who will bring a carriage, or some sort of a conveyance, the quickest? I will pay well for the services."

"I can do both," replied one of the men, "for there is a doctor visiting at my house now. It is only half a mile away. I'll be back in a jiffy."

He turned and started away on a run, and Nick and the others watched him until he had crossed the first lot. Then the detective turned to retrace his steps to the place where he had left Mercedes Danton and Cora; and as he did so, he saw a half-naked negro rise from the bushes close beside them, and with a huge club held aloft in his hand, dart forward toward the spot where the two girls, all unconscious of their danger, were awaiting his return.

Nick Carter was too far distant to reach them in time to avert the disaster, but as he started forward he uttered a warning cry.

"Cora!" he called. "The nigger! Behind you! Look out!"

And then the most surprising scene of Nick Carter's experience happened.

While he was running toward them he saw Cora Tempest leap to her feet.

For a brief instant she turned in his own direction, for she had heard his call; but then she heard the rushing feet of the negro behind her, and she wheeled and faced him while yet he was twenty or thirty feet distant. He was rushing toward her madly, his eyes aflame with madness, and with the club brandished high above his head. It seemed to Nick that one or both of the young ladies must be killed before he could get to them.

But he saw Cora Tempest thrust one hand into the bosom of her waist. Then it came out again instantly. Her arm straightened out, and, while the negro was yet not more than ten feet away from her, there w flash and a report, and he pitched forward on his senseless and dead. She had shot him squarely tween the eyes, and having done that, she pro fainted away.

"You are a queen of your kind, Cora," said N when she recovered her consciousness. "I did know you had a weapon."

"It was the one thing which Isabel forgot to away from me," she replied. "I would have given you, but I had forgotten in the excitement that I it. But why should the negro have attacked us?"

"He was mad," said Nick. "Made mad by the I struck him, the fire and his own depravity. M over, you knew that he set the buildings afire. It enough."

* * * * * * *

That evening, when Nick Carter was about to for the city, the doctor who had attended Mer followed him to the door.

"There will not be a scar left to tell the tale of fire," he said; "but there will be several months be Miss Danton will recover from the effects of her periences."

"Let us be thankful, then, that it is no worse," plied Nick. "I will return here again to-morro know how your patient is getting along."

As he was passing out at the gate toward the w which was to take him to Chicago, Cora Tem started up from the bushes beside him.

"Are you coming back here again?" she asked

"Yes; to-morrow," he replied.

"And you wish me to remain here and nurse—h

"Yes."

"Are you not afraid that I will injure her? I will kill her?"

"No, Cora. You have already saved her life tw now. I think you will nurse her back to health."

"And you will surely come back?" she asked.

"To-morrow," he replied.

THE END.

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